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Volume 6, Issue 2, pp. 90-97. (2018)

To cite this article: Aponte, G. Y. (2018). Centering the marginalized identities of immigrant students of color in the literacy classroom. *Texas Education Review*, *6*(2), 90-97.
http://hdl.handle.net/2152/68273

Centering the Marginalized Identities of Immigrant Students of Color in the Literacy Classroom

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The widespread degradation of immigrant communities of color in the Unites States has made the correlation between racial and linguistic discrimination increasingly clear. This paper describes some of the ways that the co-construction of race and language, or raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), further marginalize children of immigrant communities in schools. Attention is particularly drawn to literacy classrooms of all grades, where students' linguistic identities are pushed aside as monolingual middle-class White language practices set the standards for reading, listening, speaking, and writing instruction. The author calls for educators to embrace translanguaging (García, 2009) as a way to dismantle raciolinguistic hierarchies at the classroom level. Concrete examples of how a translanguaging approach can be implemented to center the identities of immigrant children and children of immigrant families in literacy classrooms are provided.

The cultural and linguistic barriers that immigrant students of color encounter in classrooms across the United States cannot be seen as separate from issues of ethnicity and race. The widespread degrading of minoritized immigrant groups has made that interrelationship increasingly clear. Racist ideologies have brought a sense of inferiority and heightened anxieties to children of immigrant communities across the country (DeNicolo, Yu, Crowley, & Gabel, 2017; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Paris & Alim, 2017). Now more than ever, we, as educators, must take deliberate and continuous action to combat the dissemination of these deficit views. As we strive to embrace and build on immigrant identities through culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017) and language affirming practices (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017; García & Kleifgen, 2018), it is essential that we understand and constantly reflect on our own compliance with racist ideologies that continue to marginalize those same students. Specifically, deconstructing the interrelationship and co-construction of language and race, or *raciolinguistic ideologies* (Alim, 2016; Flores & Rosa, 2015), in schools can help us understand why educational racism is not always as blatant as demanding students to "speak American," and can help educators accept that our classrooms are often the first encounter students of color have with institutional racism (Alim, 2005; Anzaldúa, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Emdin, 2016; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). This is especially true in literacy classrooms, where dominant or standardized versions of English (and, in bilingual classrooms, dominant varieties of other languages) set the standards for reading, listening, speaking, and writing instruction. Establishing idealized language practices as the status quo hinders opportunities for identity development and valuable learning for language-minoritized children (Ebe, 2010; García & Kleifgen, 2018; Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Paris & Alim, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999). This paper illustrates how a translanguaging approach (García, 2009) can begin to dismantle raciolinguistic hierarchies in schools by centering the cultural and linguistic identities of immigrant children and children of immigrant families— moving them from the margins of society to the center of our literacy classrooms.

Deconstructing Raciolinguistic Ideologies in US Schools

Before we can take deliberate action towards equitably educating immigrant youth of color, we must acknowledge how systemic racism and raciolinguistic ideologies (Alim, 2016; Rosa &

Flores, 2017) continue to devalue their dynamic multilingual and multicultural identities. Specifically, a *raciolinguistic perspective*, as presented by Rosa and Flores (2017), highlights the ways in which language and race are co-constructed and thus intricately interrelated— being that language ideologies influence the racialization and ethnicization of people, and that likewise, racialized perceptions of speakers influence how others interpret their speech. Our country's racist history has resulted in a widespread perception of correctness and prestige in the cultural and linguistic practices of dominant middle-class White communities. Consequently, the dynamic language practices of communities of color are regularly seen as deficient by "White listening subjects," which, as Flores and Rosa (2015) explain, include individuals (White or non-White) who perceive language through a dominant White linguistic lens. Some perceptions of linguistic deficiencies include the stigmatization of fluid bilingual language practices like *Spanglish* and the so-called "word gap" that has been widely used to describe the alleged vocabulary discrepancy in children of low-income communities, predominantly from families of color (García & Otheguy, 2017). Nonetheless, even when racialized individuals adopt dominant language practices, their speech typically continues to be perceived as deficient and impoverished (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2016)

In schools, raciolinguistic compliance is evident in the standardization of dominant, middle-class White linguistic norms. Students who do not speak, write, and comprehend the standardized version of English are stigmatized by educational policies that center language practices deemed normative or "appropriate" (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This is embodied in the limited notion of *academic language* that learning standards and standardized assessments require children to understand and utilize in order to be academically successful. Minoritized linguistic identities are shoved to the margins as schools aim to repair children's linguistic repertoires, teaching them to mimic dominant language practices for academic purposes without questioning the *White listening subject* (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This naturalization of idealized monolingual language practices perpetuates deficit views of immigrant children and often prevents teachers from recognizing and building on their rich linguistic repertoires (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; Flores, 2016; Flores & Rosa, 2015; García & Otheguy, 2017; Rosa, 2016; Sánchez et al., 2017).

Since immigrant children are regularly placed in bilingual classrooms, it is also important to recognize how racialized monolingual ideologies are encompassed in bilingual programs. Dual Language Bilingual programs for example, which aim to equitably educate language-minoritized students in two languages, actually restrict the fluid and dynamic language practices, or *translanguaging*, of bilingual students. Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) refer to translanguaging as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically (and usually national and state) defined boundaries of named languages" (p. 283). Naturally, for multilinguals, this entails thinking and communicating fluidly in what society considers two (or more) different languages. While some teachers have begun to embrace such flexible and authentic ways of languaging through translanguaging pedagogies (García et al., 2017; García & Kleyn, 2016), most Dual Language Bilingual programs continue to rigidly separate the languages of instruction by allocating specific times or spaces for each language (Sánchez, García, & Solorza, 2017). Influenced by raciolinguistic orientations of containment rather than by the lived experiences of bilingual communities themselves, educators learn to judge students' translanguaging through a lens of "semilingualism" (Cummins, 1994) or "languagelessness" (Rosa, 2016) — racialized ideologies that position students as incapable of effectively communicating in *any* language, while implying that complete and legitimate repertoires of those languages *do* exist in communities of power. Rather than seeing each child's repertoire as complete and reflective of their successful lived experiences in communities outside of school, educators are trained to measure students' linguistic competence based on how well they perform dominant language practices (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Otheguy et al., 2015; Paris & Alim, 2017). As a result, students of immigrant communities who do

not speak the standardized monolingual version of each language experience twofold marginalization, even in bilingual classrooms.

Raciolinguistic dialogues of deficient bilingual communities have detrimental socioemotional and academic consequences for minoritized immigrant communities. First, questioning the legitimacy of a group's language is dehumanizing, for it questions the legitimacy of their personhood. Linguistic insecurity and an internalized sense of inferiority are inevitable as children learn to exist in relation to White middle-class monolingual Americans. Moreover, as children learn that they must wear "white masks" (Fanon, 1967) to comply with monolingual White listening subjects (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and attain academic and social mobility, they inevitably learn to suppress and ultimately shed their stigmatized immigrant identities. To deny students of their full linguistic repertoires is to deny them of their histories, of their experiences, and of their identities. As educators, it is our obligation to continuously examine the extent to which we are perpetuating discourses of appropriateness in our classrooms and thus inciting erasure of non-dominant identities. Only then can we be sure to educate language-minoritized children in ways that extend their rich repertoires, rather than in ways that restrict them to one legitimized way of being.

Translanguaging to Center Immigrant Identities in the Literacy Classroom

If we are to embrace immigrant students' full identities in schools, we must move away from racialized hegemonic views of bilingualism and begin to center students' dynamic multilingualism in the literacy classroom (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; García, 2009; García & Kleifgen, 2018; Palmer & Martínez, 2016). Teachers who embrace translanguaging understand that students' linguistic repertoires cannot be incomplete, truncated, or limited-proficient, even if they do not reflect the standardized varieties of languages prevalent in assessments and mainstream texts. That is, in order to dismantle raciolinguistic hierarchies, educators must begin with the assurance that *all* children enter school with rich and dynamic home language practices that could and should be at the center of the curriculum. We must cultivate pride in how multilingual children language, while also exposing them to how others may judge, use, and interpret language in different contexts (Alim, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Emdin, 2016; García & Kleifgen, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). It is from this position of *strength*, not of deficiency, that teachers can design ways of validating and then building on multilingual repertoires, especially those that are continuously marginalized.

With children of immigrant communities repeatedly being made to feel inferior, unwelcomed, and even threatened in environments outside of school, a welcoming translanguaging classroom environment is especially crucial for their success. Being transparent about our own vulnerability and constantly modeling reflection of our uncertainties and inevitable acts of biases can foster the empathy and openness needed to appreciate immigrant identities. This kind of authenticity is crucial in cultivating individuals who are culturally flexible and critically reflective. Creating and maintaining a safe translanguaging classroom also begins with us, as educators, modeling mutual respect, reciprocal learning, and an overall genuine desire to learn from and coexist with linguistically diverse individuals. Taking action to learn about diverse cultural practices and learning words and phrases in students' home languages, for example, is one simple and direct way of establishing that diverse cultural and linguistic norms are in fact just as valuable as those that are made to seem neutral.

But, taking a value-oriented perspective towards immigrant students of color entails more than just learning from their parents; it entails partnering with families to equitably educate *all* children and disrupt the monolingual nature of schooling. This partnership requires learning and teaching alongside immigrant families and seeking to better understand and welcome their values, norms, histories, and literacies—their *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 1992). Educators must remember

and regularly remind parents that they are their child's primary educators and emphasize the importance of sustaining their cultural and linguistic practices. Moreover, while parents may be invited to share their knowledge on classroom topics, it is more important that teachers go beyond narrow curricula to center families' broad range of understandings, language, culture, and histories (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Recording audio and video in their home languages provide creative opportunities for parents who cannot be physically present to contribute from afar. This could mean, for example, that family members are invited to teach students and other families how to make quipes, weave toquilla straw hats, design mehndi patterns, use fingers to count to ten in Mandarin, or sing a traditional song in Gujarati. Connecting the school's rigid notion of what literacy is to these diverse literacies is one way of collaboratively narrowing the linguistic and cultural gap that exists between schools and the homes of immigrant families.

Translanguaging also serves to leverage immigrant identities for academic purposes. Even though translanguaging is always present in multilingual students, children develop pride and agency in their learning when they're explicitly encouraged to use their full linguistic repertoire to engage with literacy (Freeman et al., 2003; García & Kleifgen, 2018; García & Kleyn, 2016; Gay, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017). Moreover, inviting bilingual children to express their thoughts bilingually can lead to more holistic and thorough understandings of their reading comprehension and literacy development (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; García et al., 2017). Leveraging students' oral language is especially essential for students who do not read or write in their home languages (García, Herrera, Hesson, & Kleyn, 2013). Interactive and listening activities, for example, can serve as starting points for developing reading and writing skills in both languages. Bilingual dictionaries, glossaries, digital tools, and electronic translators can allow educators to observe and leverage students' full linguistic backgrounds for learning. During reading, it is imperative to provide books in students' home languages and supplement lessons with texts relevant to the material so students can build an understanding of the content before engaging in English. Similarly, bilingual children must feel comfortable brainstorming, planning, and drafting in any language as they work towards completing final assignments. Inviting them to share and submit work written bilingually or in their home language is a powerful way to remind students that their full linguistic identities play a central role as they learn and expand their linguistic repertoire. When immigrant children are positioned as agentive participants and mediators of their own literacy and language development, they learn to leverage their bilingualism and use language as deemed appropriate for different contexts. And because language is so tied to who a person is, this inclusivity also means that students feel more comfortable sharing more of themselves and their experiences in the literacy classroom (Alanís, 2007; Alim 2005; Delpit, 1995; DeNicolo et al. 2017; Emdin, 2016; García & Kleyn, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999).

Educators can further work towards dismantling the hegemony reflected in schools by modifying literacy units to learn about and celebrate the cultures, linguistic practices, and stories of marginalized immigrant groups. This means that teachers should be flexible and think creatively about the means taken towards achieving reading, writing, listening, and speaking objectives (García et al., 2017). Making room for storytelling, for example, is a powerful way of validating diverse identities, creating empathy, and helping students understand the complex history of the United States. Immigrant stories can be highlighted through bilingual and multimodal literacy such as digital storytelling, intergenerational interviews, artistic displays, dance and drama (García et al., 2013). Standard writing curricula can also be modified so that immigrant identities shine through biographical, historical, fictional, narrative, essay, poetry, and even test-preparation writing units. From teaching narrative techniques by creating fictional immigrant characters who translanguage, to teaching the structure of a descriptive paragraph by delineating the many social and cognitive

benefits of being bilingual, literacy classrooms allow for a myriad of opportunities to highlight immigrant stories of struggle, achievements, and contributions within and beyond the classroom.

Modifying literacy curricula to center immigrant identities also entails replacing and supplementing literature with culturally and linguistically relevant texts. These include texts written in students' home languages, texts that highlight issues typically encountered by racialized persons, and texts that tell everyday stories of diverse characters without otherizing them.[1] In addition to enhancing reading comprehension (Alanís, 2007; Ebe, 2010; Freeman et al., 2003), such literature can also be used to support students as they develop their identities as bilingual readers. For one, educators can help students recognize how their unique bilingual and bicultural perspectives allow for more profound interpretation and enjoyment of literature. As they analyze injustices faced by minoritized characters, for example, or the various reasons authors choose to translanguage, students become empowered to write about their own lives and gain the competence to choose when to deploy specific linguistic features in ways that transcend boundaries (García et al., 2017; García & Kleyn, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017). But, because it can be difficult to find books that resonate with immigrant students' identities, it is also important to provide opportunities for students to engage in multimodal readings of music, film, websites, articles, and podcasts, for example. Partnering with families, especially those who may not have received formal schooling or who speak unwritten languages, can result in powerful audio and video recordings that can serve as supplemental resources in the literacy classrooms (García et al., 2013). By deviating from traditional definitions of "texts," teachers can assist all children in reflecting on the lived experiences of *all* identities in the classroom, thereby cultivating an appreciation of linguistic and cultural pluralism.

"Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity" (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 38). Thus, when multilingualism is not explicitly valued, children inevitably learn to suppress parts of their cultural and linguistic identities as they strive to communicate in English only (García & Kleifgen, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999). A critical translanguaging approach, on the other hand, encourages educators to dismantle raciolinguistic hierarchies by centering, leveraging, and celebrating immigrant students' complete identities. Embracing translanguaging, however, is just one small step in the process of decolonizing education—the "powerful, state-sanctioned instrument of cultural de-identification" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 161). As we continue to problematize how dominant ideologies uphold educational inequities at the classroom level, it is essential that we begin to foster criticality in children from a young age and move beyond adultism to focus on the voices of those at the center of it.

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[1] For a list of books and resources, visit the CUNY-NYSIEB website: https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/

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